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Reply to 'Is Binge Drinking in Adolescents Related to Specific Impairments in Well-Being?' by Rafanelli et al.

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The study of Rafanelli et al. [1] on binge drinking in adolescents is very informative regarding the development of resiliency and well-being. Reward experience in daily life is an important mechanism of resiliency and well-being, particularly in case of important childhood adversity and recent stressful life events [2]. Positive affect can even neutralize the effects of genetic vulnerability for affective disorders. Adolescence is a critical period in the development of the reward system. In that period, it has to adjust to new, potentially positive experiences including increased independence, preparation of adult roles, voting, sexual relations, professional achievements and alcohol consumption. Comparing identical twins with and without major depression, Kendler and Halberstadt [3] demonstrated that – given the same genetic risk – low quality of intimate love relationships and occupational difficulties in young adulthood were the most common etiological factors of major depression. These findings are compatible with the hypothesis that early positive experiences have long-lasting protective effects on mental health [4]. Binge drinking likely represents a marker of a disturbed development of the reward system. If the first steps into independence and prosocial activities outside of the family fail to lead to genuine reward experiences, alcohol abuse is a

possible way to activate the reward system and to counteract negative emotions. Rafanelli et al. showed that stress was an important correlate of binge drinking in adolescence, which is in line with this explanation. In addition, they showed that low environmental mastery, i.e. the feeling to be unable to improve the social context, further increased the risk of binge drinking. Together, these findings should remind parents to protect their adolescent offspring from unhealthy means to activate their reward system and to support them to find opportunities to experience life in a positive and controllable way. Politicians should be aware that youth unemployment and a 'culture of intoxication' may have long-lasting negative consequences on mental health. Health experts should routinely assess and address positive affect and well-being in their clients. Although these facets of psychological experiencing and functioning are not diagnostic criteria for DMS and ICD disorders, they are highly relevant for our patients [5], and crucial for the development of lasting resiliency.

References

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